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Is There Such a Thing as a Nimble Academic Library? Thoughts on Governance.

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The academic library where I work recently instituted a privacy policy. I helped usher it through and it took nearly a year and somewhere around fifteen face-to-face conversations (probably 50 emails) to get it discussed, reviewed, and posted on the library's Website. It's two pages long. The policy itself is roughly a paragraph (the rest of the document consists of procedures). During the whole process, I kept thinking, "There must be an easier way to make decisions in libraries."

Decision-making is really another word for communication. Yes, decision-making includes the additional element of a person or group actually saying "yes," "no," or "maybe," but getting to that point is all about communication. And communication can be challenging, especially when multiple parties are involved.

Despite this, I think it is possible to establish efficient, clear lines of communication in a large organization like an academic library. I also think it is possible to utilize that system to generate excitement, energy, and new ideas. Such systems can even lead to decisions about which new ideas to implement or what existing services to change or stop. I really do think this. And here's why.

Original ideas come from people. Those ideas get generated when people interact with each other either through conversation or reading. Further refinement comes from thinking, testing, and exploring. The trick in large organizations is having a communication and decision-making system (i.e., governance) that everyone is aware of and knows how to use. This means the governance structure needs to be written down, described, and defined. People need some sense of whom to take ideas to, and at each point in the process they should have some confidence that there will be a logical next step.

Hope for the Future

At the same time that we drafted our privacy policy, the library also established a new governance structure similar to what the colleges at our university use: a single faculty council with a limited number of standing committees. This system augments the existing departments and divisions already present in the colleges. We named our newly created faculty council the Library Council and built ten standing committees. We organized the committees to bring together people from each operational division. In essence, we re-connected the somewhat siloed divisions into a manageable whole.

The divisions in the library where I work probably represent what many academic libraries have: Administration, Scholarly Resources & Collections, Research & Learning Services, Information Technology, and Special Collections. Over 250 people are employed through these divisions. Getting the right people to talk to each other at the right time in order to make the right kind of decision has always been a challenge — as attested by the twelve months needed to implement the privacy policy.

Like most academic libraries, we made well-intended attempts at connecting people by having lots and lots of committees. At the time of the restructuring, the library had over 25 committees. The old committees had little or no connection to the leadership teams in each division nor did they formally connect to the dean's executive committee. Committee work felt somewhat like a waste of time to most people since the work never seemed to result in implementation, change, or any kind of meaningful decision-making.

The new governance structure attempts to remedy this sense of frustration. Now, ten standing committees report to the Library Council (it's within the dean's purview to create ad hoc committees as needed). The Council has jurisdiction over library services related to educational policy, faculty appointments and tenure reviews, program development, and special projects within these areas. The dean chairs the Library Council and uses its executive committee as an advisory board to guide decisions on matters that fall outside the Library Council's jurisdiction. Associate deans lead their respective divisions, manage existing library operations, and foster those crucial conversations that generate new and original ideas for further exploration.

We wrote a charter to define the Library Council and used that document to communicate (and make transparent) the new structure. The charter details basic information such as the Council's jurisdiction, its membership, voting rules, and meeting schedule. It outlines each committee's mission statement, terms of service, and membership qualifications.

The Way it Should Work

One of the most essential standing committees of the new Library Council, in my opinion, is the Library Services Committee. It is by far the largest committee, with twenty-three elected members consisting of at least four representatives from each division. This is the group that I wish had existed last year when I wanted to initiate discussion about a possible privacy policy. It could have been a single stop for me to get perspectives from those in IT, Special Collections, Research & Learning Services, Scholarly Resources & Collections, and Administration. Instead, I spent my time going from office to office, making phone calls and sending emails. I would have preferred to spend a couple of meetings with the Library Services Committee to get feedback, have them talk to their colleagues in their division about the idea, have more discussion, and then move to implementation. I'd like to test it with another policy or idea and see if I can cut the implementation time in half.

As the new governance structure gets implemented, I anticipate more engagement from faculty and staff if only for the simple reason of having clarified the decision-making process through the new written charter. It will require a different mindset, too, but having a written charter to respond to and converse about helps foster change and, in my opinion, keeps an organization nimble. 🐼

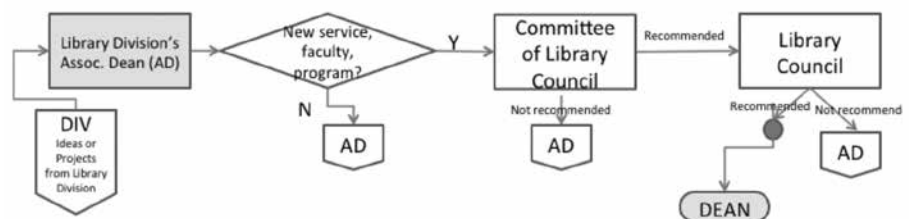
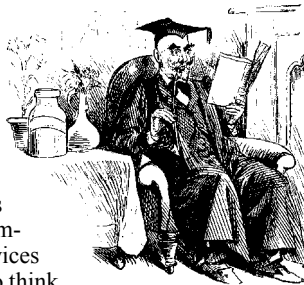


Figure 1. Flowchart showing how existing library divisions will interface with new Library Council. If ideas or projects receive a "no" vote from the Library Council, they go back to the division's associate dean for more discussion and refinement within the division.